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ABSTRACT

In order to better meet the needs of a diverse and rapidly changing service area, the North Harris Montgomery Community College District (NHMCCD), in Texas, began in the late 1980's to initiate improvements in the areas of instructional methods, student services, community outreach, and technological support. Instructional changes have included the incorporation of interdisciplinary studies and team-taught block courses combining world civilization with the history of art, or the history of philosophy with world literature. Another example of instructional renewal was the implementation of an honors program in fall 1993 which offers students three ways to take courses and three levels of involvement with the program: as basic Honors Students; as Honors Graduates, completing at least 16 hours of honors credit; and as Honors Scholars, or Honors Graduates who have completed a service project. The NHMCCD also obtained a Title III grant specifically designed to provide faculty with development opportunities and to increase student success and persistence through the development of a language skills center, an applied learning center, a computerized assessment center, an institutional research program, and an improved developmental mathematics program. Finally, the District has undertaken efforts to improve relations with the external community through faculty membership in community-based committees dealing with the direction of the District and the formation of sustainable external partnerships with the community, business and industry, and other universities. (TGI)

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INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AS A RENEWAL PROCESS: THE NHMCCD MODEL

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Abstract

When the NHMCCD found itself in the late eighties with a sound financial footing, a multicampus structure, and generally adequate physical facilities, it was time for a new look at instructional methods, student services, community outreach, and technological support. Therefore, new instructional delivery systems, including collaborative teaching, distance learning, an honors program, and multicultural courses have appeared within the District to meet the needs of the diverse communities within the service area. Along with these innovations in instruction have come the necessary changes in student services and technology, the costs of which have been met by a combination of tax and tuition increases, grants (including Title III), the establishment of a foundation, and a record of continued growth enrollment. The internal renewal has been painful for some faculty, but the majority are agreed that the changes auger well for its ability to provide the highest possible quality of services to students.

Introduction

Now a four-college district, North Harris Montgomery Community College District (NHMCCD), comprised of six independent school districts, is a publicly-supported, two-year, comprehensive community college district with open admission, offering post-secondary educational opportunities to approximately 20,000 credit and 30,000 non-credit students annually in the northern metropolitan Houston area. Today, twenty years after the doors were opened, NHMCCD offers over 59 programs of study in day, evening, and weekend classes in traditional as well as independent study, televised, and fast track formats. Income is derived from four basic sources: state funding (54.9%), federal funding (.1%), local taxes (31.2%), student tuition (12.2%), and other local sources (1.6%). Combined, these sources of income enable the District to provide high-quality instruction at a relatively low cost.

History

Historically, the colleges in the District have attempted to provide an educational environment supportive of the community's needs, but the immediate community surrounding North Harris College (NHC), for about twelve years the only campus, changed dramatically during the 1980's. Ten years ago, the area was an affluent, predominantly white suburb five miles from Houston's Intercontinental Airport and twenty miles north of Houston's inner city. An economic crisis, precipitated by the drastic drop in oil prices in the early '80s, resulted in marked demographic changes in the area. During the middle and late '80s, many lower-income families, including large numbers of ethnic minorities, moved into the area and rented or purchased homes in neighborhoods which had been previously solidly middle-income. The Aldine ISD, where NHC is located physically, is now approximately one-third African-American, one-third Latino, and one-third white. The estimated 1990 population of the service area was 3,031,747, with all reports from local government and school districts indicating that demographics continue to change. Furthermore, among residents of the service area only 68 percent of those 25 years or older have completed high school compared to 82 percent just eight years ago. The high school dropout rate also continues to rise, increasing from 19 percent in 1985 to 22 percent in 1992.

Just as the economic crisis struck Houston, the original single-campus college was in the process of splitting into a multicampus district. District expansion and a plummeting tax base were paralleled by a student body forced back into the college setting for retraining by the collapse of the oil industry. The District found itself in the late '80s with a basically sound financial footing, despite the vagaries of the economy, with a multicampus structure, and generally with adequate physical facilities, but with a diverse, rapidly changing student population, and with a long-established faculty (average age, 46.5; average tenure specifically at NHC, ten years plus) aware of but sometimes uncomfortable with the institutional changes necessary.

Significant change was most necessary in administrative philosophy and personnel. The founding fathers (no mothers in 1972) were former high school administrators who naturally brought a public school frame of reference to the college. The president and academic dean applied great energy to nurturing community support, developing the physical plant, and husbanding the funds with careful allocation of salary and benefits. The curriculum offered was largely safe, traditional, and easily transferable to four-year institutions. The courses were primarily academic since the surrounding community was largely white-collar, middle income people little interested in traditionally vocational areas. Moreover, the founding administration took what many instructors saw as an in loco parentis attitude toward both student population and faculty. However, the multicampus spread and burgeoning size demanded that we move beyond the "mom and pop store" mentality and develop a new model for the future.

New Administration

The new administration has a university/community college frame of reference. The current chancellor, John Pickelman, reorganized the district office, putting vice chancellors in charge of duties such as finance, educational programs, and technical services, and changed the multicampus structure to a multicollege form, allowing unprecedented autonomy to the college presidents in terms of program development and budget planning. The colleges responded with an explosion of activity engaging all segments of the institution.

Most significantly, the administration and faculty are working together to revise instructional methods, student services, community outreach, and technological support. The process of review and revision has proved to be particularly revitalizing for faculty involved in new instructional delivery systems including collaborative teaching, distance learning, an honors program, and multicultural courses. Along with these innovations in instruction have come the necessary changes in student services and technology, the costs of which have been met by a combination of tax and tuition increases, grants (including Title III), and the establishment of legislative action groups and a College Effectiveness Council.

Instructional Changes

One of the most exciting issues in renewing faculty commitment and involvement concerns the review of the instructional program including interdisciplinary studies and the honors option. Beginning in the mid-1980's, a group of NHC instructors from the humanities and social sciences began meeting to discuss ways to integrate the subject matter of their different disciplines. They called themselves the Neo-Hegelians after the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who emphasized the wholeness of truth, the dynamic interaction of the various parts of truth, and the evolution through history of successively high levels of synthesis in the human grasp of truth. The Neo-Hegelians exchanged textbooks from courses in the history of world civilization, history of art, history of philosophy, and masterpieces of world literature, all two-semester sequences. From the study of these texts arose discussions on the possibilities of integrating the material into team-taught block courses.

In the spring of 1992, the President Sandy Shugart and Dean of Instruction Joe McMillian threw the first significant administrative support behind the concept by sending three of the neo-Hegelians to Washington state, which is renowned for block course teaching. Our team visited Evergreen State University and Seattle Central Community College, returning highly informed and energized after seeing as many as five disciplines combined into a single block constituting a full-time student load. The Washington state participants spoke of extraordinary class cohesion, as if the knitting together of the disciplines and the assignment of group projects magically produced a close-knit group of students. The closeness of the students, in turn, led to dramatically high retention rates in block courses. The faculty, too, described teaching with each other as the single greatest form of professional development that they had ever experienced. Their experiences also proved true at NHC.

The second phase of tangible administrative support for block course teaching came in the fall of 1992 when four instructors received a one-course release each for the preparation and teaching of the block course, one combining history of world civilization with history of art and the other combining history of philosophy with masterpieces of world literature. The blocks met twice a week for three hours per meeting. The provision of release times enabled instructors of both blocks to be in class during all of the weekly meeting times. The issue of whether to continue release time for the teaching of block courses already established is not a standard procedure but is settled instead on a case-by-case basis, depending on the instructor's statement of need for the extra time.

Some of the great moments in the block courses meeting 1992-93 included:

1. The literature selection of the book of Job raised the philosophical problem of evil, which was later developed in strictly syllogistic form after the class learned the fundamentals of Aristotle's logic.

2. Dante's Comaedia is richly based with philosophical references which students were in a position to appreciate by the time we reached the 1300's. For example, the fact that Virgil cannot guide Dante into heaven but must defer to Beatrice mirrors Aquinas's sequence of reason leading to faith.

We were able to observe from these and many other moments of integration class members coalescing through cross-disciplinary discussion. We also fostered the sense of class unity by having a class party at the home of one of the instructors.

Not all of the attempts at team teaching have succeeded: a combination of Composition I and Introduction to Philosophy failed to attract the necessary number of registrants. We are also beleaguered by a computer system that allows students to register for one half of a block but not the other. Nevertheless, the spirit of block course learning communities continues at NHC with new offerings being planned. One in the works will be called "Loss of a Center" and will explore the roots of and the solutions to the erosion of moral consensus in our society. This course will integrate themes from philosophy, art, history, and science. Another will be a PTK honors course on "Our Complex World: Balancing Unity and Diversity, " and a third covers topics in leadership and will be "required" of student organization leaders and the college Ambassadors.

Honors Program

Another form of institutional renewal within the District is the inauguration of an Honors Program at North Harris College. Again, the concept had formerly been under discussion and a section or two offered, but the forces for full implementation did not coalesce until recently. Under the leadership of psychology instructor Sandy Deabler, a committee began meeting in the fall of 1992 to address whether a college that does so much for the least academically able in developmental programs might not also do something *special* for its top-caliber students. But what? Simply more of the same kind of work was not the answer; instead, the committee sought ways of providing enrichment, challenge, and collaborative learning for honors students. Two committee members attended the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference that year, and the committee also relied heavily on literature available from the Council and from Patricia M. McKee's survey on honors programs for the League for Innovation in Community Colleges.

During that year the committee refined its statements on goals of the program, student selection criteria, faculty selection criteria, course format, recognition of honors students, service projects for honors students, and administration and evaluation of the program. The NHC program now includes three ways of taking courses for honors credit:

1. by contract in a course that includes non-honors students.
2. by special honors sections of existing courses.
3. by special multidisciplinary honors courses.

Projecting to the future, the committee envisions three levels of student involvement with the program:

1. An Honors Student would simply be any student taking a course for honors credit.
2. An Honors Graduate would be a graduate who had completed at least 16 hours of honors credit.
3. An Honors Scholar would be an honors graduate who had completed a service project.

The implementation of the program began on a pilot basis in the fall semester of 1993 with the offering of honors credit by contract in the English department's Mythology course. Instructor Arlene Schultz successfully guided two of the approximately fifteen students through the terms of the contract, which included reading an extra book, making an extra report to the class, and attending four additional seminar meetings with the instructor. In the spring

semester of 1994, honors credit was offered in biology, English, French, psychology, sociology, and Spanish courses. The English course, a sophomore-level survey of British Literature I, team-taught by Instructor Cher Brock and Academic Vice President Bill Richards, incorporates elements of collaborative learning with the required papers and exams and requires honors students to attend and conduct additional collaborative seminars during the semester. In order for the honors students to provide the leadership in class discussions, finish the required papers and presentations, and enrich their understanding of course material, the instructors and honors students have also developed a closer, more intellectually satisfying relationship than is usually possible in a typical class. The willingness with which the students communicate their questions and insights has been a revitalizing force for the faculty involved.

Though off to a good start, the program faces a number of challenges as it develops over the next few years. The initial enrollments have been low, so ways of attracting more students need to be explored. Some instructors oppose the honors program as a potential drain of talent from regular course sections. The issue of release time for the extra duties of teaching honors sections has not been resolved, and the outlines of appropriate services projects for honors scholars are but faintly limned. Still, there is much interest among the faculty at large, and there is high commitment to the program among the current honors faculty.

Title III

Another major revitalizing factor has been the opportunity for faculty from diverse disciplines to interact in planning and applying for grants, resulting in faculty and institutional renewal. The administration has been far-seeing in its willingness to support long-term goals. The Title III grant NHC applied for--and got--will help address what is seen as a critical need at NHC specifically. While the demographics and academic preparedness of the student population are changing rapidly and placing new demands on instructional programs, the faculty have lacked some of the tools, technology, and expertise to meet student needs effectively. Therefore, to supplement funding, the faculty became involved in the grant-writing process. The benefits of the grant have been and will be renewing for the faculty involved.

The process of planning and writing the grant began with meetings conducted by the Academic Vice President to discuss what the faculty saw as major problems. The early stages involved representatives from the English, modern languages, math, sciences, and business technology faculties as well as counseling and community education. An ideal picture of several areas was formed and, over a period of about a month, the field was limited to a more manageable and fundable scope, focusing on basic skills across the academic and technical curricula with flexible computerized assessment and accessible institutional research facilities to support current and projected enrollment. Then, the administration put its money where its collective mouth was: it provided one class of release time for each of the faculty writers of the grant, allowing each more time to research, collaborate, and write. The four faculty involved (one each from office administration, developmental studies, English, and math) worked with each other, their colleagues and department heads, and the VP with the April deadline for proposals always ominously in the foreground. Each writer came to trust the suggestions, criticisms, and epiphanies of the others as all worked through the arduous task of formulating, formatting, and finalizing drafts. No matter how different the disciplines, the writers learned about the similarities of the methods involved in the critical thinking, problem-solving, collaborative effort. The hours of close contact among the writers and the faculty and facilities of the other departments were a rewarding experience that has carried over to other interdisciplinary collaborations among them, benefiting the students and the institution. A few English classes, for instance, are now taught in OFAD labs.

Generally speaking, the grant is designed to increase student success and persistence by developing and improving five activities over a five-year period. Built into the first three activities are faculty training, travel, and curriculum assessment. The grant will involve approximately 70 members of the faculty each year in cycles of faculty training and will require equipment acquisitions, course development, and implementation of strategies which will support such developments. The grant has also required adding key support personnel, including an instructional design specialist, a workplace literacy specialist, an assessment coordinator, and institutional research specialists. Specifically, the major activities include:

1. the improvement of the developmental mathematics program by
    a. adding different instructional delivery approaches to accommodate student learning styles.
    b. acquiring computers (a 60-computer math teaching theater and computer projection systems for several classrooms).
    c. designing software and videos to enhance class, lab and individual effectiveness.

2. development of a Language Skills Center including such considerations as
    a. reviewing the current curriculum and developing assessment strategies for the writing sequence.
    b. adding computer-aided instruction (CAI) and computer-aided composition (CAC) to existing strategies (2 classrooms of 20 and 2 classrooms of 25 computers).
    c. training both full-time and adjunct faculty in design and CAI.
    d. disseminating information to peers and students.

3. development of an Applied Learning Center in order to
    a. analyze reading and writing needs of the technical occupational areas.
    b. diagnose specific reading and writing competencies.
    c. develop reading and writing tutorial materials relevant to the technical occupational areas.
    d. allow students to develop reading and writing skills concurrently with the technical skills required by using a flexible delivery system.
    e. provide a center where such instruction is available.

4. development of a computerized assessment center in order to
    a. improve the accuracy of student placement in classes and in programs based on information to help make informed academic and career decisions.
    b. improve the number of special needs students who succeed and persist.
    c. provide an alternative testing site for classroom tests.
    d. provide the faculty with training in test construction and analysis and with tools to modify and adapt programs.

5. development of an institutional research program to
    a. contribute to a more reliable level of institutional self-awareness.
    b. train faculty and administrators in research applications.
    c. develop applied research models in community needs, student outcomes, classroom research, and administrative effectiveness.
    d. collect and apply data logically and consistently.

Obviously, the collaboration required to re-examine curricula in the various areas has revitalized the idea of partnerships among the disciplines, and the connections formed with developmental studies as a foundation--in the writing sequence, the reading and writing modules for the technology certificate programs, the math sequence--will continue to encourage cross-disciplinary cooperation and innovation. What is most important, however, is that, with administrative commitment and with the coordination of the instructional designer and other support, the faculty are learning and applying technology and imagination to enhance and strengthen the effectiveness of instruction, a renewing factor for those dedicated to teaching.

NHC is not the only NHMCCD college to have been revitalized with the continuing incorporation of technology. Dr. Mary Ella Phelps, Division Head at Tomball College, reports: "Our art instructor, who is an established artist, has taken it upon himself to learn design graphics so that his students will be introduced to how artistic talent is a marketable talent. The Humanities committee has been excited about putting together a multi-media presentation to market their program. The English instructors have been amazing in their willingness to jump into a new way of teaching, and their excitement carries over to the students. As a result of the excitement. . ., many instructors meet together once or twice a week to teach each other what they have learned."

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Committees

Two other salient examples of faculty revitalization are the district-wide Legislative Action Committee and NHC's College Effectiveness Council. The first example, as its name implies, works with state and local elected officials on matters relevant to higher education. Comprised of faculty and administration, the group has successfully lobbied allocations to support the college's nearly constant enrollment growth, but their efforts go beyond simply funding. Many members work with the legislature and state offices on policy development as well. The College Effectiveness Council at NHC studies where the college is and where it is likely to be headed. There have been extensive discussions with students, community leaders, local businessperson, and outside educators to discover what they think NHC is doing well and what needs to be changed. The demographic shifts, for example, will likely prompt increased need for developmental studies and ESL (currently the two fastest growing areas of the college), more emphasis on multicultural studies, and a welcome increase in minority faculty. We are also involved in developing curricula to train students for success in a postindustrial information age, assuring them a firm foundation in critical thinking and technological skills--attempting to create lifelong learners.

External Connections

Given the drastic demographic, economic, geographical expansion of the district, as well as significant technological shifts, the Board of Trustees and administration have been faced with major issues districtwide in order to continue to offer high quality programs, services, and instruction for the students, taxpayers, and businesses. The majority of these issues focus on change and the establishment of sustainable external partnerships. NHMCCD is dealing with making its comprehensive colleges centerpieces of a broader learning community.

Special activities implemented to build the partnerships needed include the following:

1. Establishing a broad-based Business and Industry Council (BIC) focused on regional needs for postsecondary education, workforce development, business and economic development, and corporate training.

2. Establishing broad-based Citizen Advisory Councils for each college to focus on strategic planning for facilities, programs, and effectiveness of the college.

3. Implementing College-To-School Board to Board Dialogue for planning and information sharing with ISD Boards and NHMCCD Board members.

4. Developing the Center for Business and Economic Development (CBED) to promote small business startup, ongoing business development, and customized/contract education and training. This development resulted in the creation of the Alliance of Chambers of Commerce (II) serving the areas.

5. Serving as location and providing leadership for two region-wide (13 counties) activities focused on Tech prep and on Quality Workforce Regional Planning.

6. Creating a partnership with the Montgomery County library system to establish a seamless learning resources access between the county libraries and NHMCCD college libraries.

7. Establishing a leadership role in regional education and economic development through such efforts as university partnerships with Our Lady of the Lake (North Harris College), Houston Baptist University (Kingwood College), The University of Houston (District Office), and numerous direct articulation agreements with universities to provide barrier-free transfer for students.

Conclusion

The revitalizing changes, then, have been managerial, pedagogical, curricular, and philosophical. Instead of mouthing platitudes about participatory management, the staff, faculty, administration, board, and community have formed a clear partnership dedicated to educating lifelong learners for the twenty-first century. The internal renewal has been challenging for all, but the majority agree that the changes auger well for the ability to provide the highest possible quality of service to students. Through the opening of communications, collaboration on all levels, and

a willingness to risk, NHMCCD collectively has become a learning knowledge-based organization and has assumed a regional role in education and community development.